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ABSTRACT

The use of "academic forgiveness," which allows students to be considered for readmission or graduation to college, is discussed, with attention to the procedures used by nine state colleges in New Jersey. The student is allowed an opportunity for low grades or other evaluations to be removed, under certain conditions, from grade point average (GPA) calculations or other determinations. None of the New Jersey colleges recasts the permanent record of the readmitted student (i.e., no grades are factored out of the transcript). However, the colleges handle loss of credit and the GPA of readmitted students in different ways. All of the colleges except one allow students to repeat courses. Four of the colleges allow students to use the higher grade earned in their GPA; the other colleges use all grades earned in the computation of GPA. The main factors involved in a restart scheme are: time absent from the institution; the recasting of the student record following readmittance; and conditions or constraints affecting the GPA and credits needed for graduation. The average time away from the institution for students at the New Jersey colleges is 2 years. Recasting the student record usually deals with "D" and "F" grades. Some schools allow a total restarting of courses and GPA--a trade off of all grades for the opportunity to begin again. (SW)

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RESTARTING VOLUNTARY LEAVE AND ACADEMICALLY DISMISSED STUDENTS

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Restarting Voluntary Leave and Academically Dismissed Students

Starting Over

In addition to the hundreds of students who are dismissed for academic reasons from our nation's colleges and universities, are hundreds more who leave voluntarily. The reasons given by students for leaving, in either case, include entering college too soon and being unable to cope with parental, economic or social pressures, lack of maturity and motivation, improper advisement, illness, or severe personal problems. In some instances, students have become so disenchanted or frustrated with themselves or their college that they simply have left the institution without withdrawing officially. Subsequently, D's, F's and Incompletes often accumulate on the student's record. If these same students seek readmittance, say some years later under new or different circumstances than before, their previous experience must be addressed in some manner. Interviews are often held, and conditions and a process for monitoring student progress usually are imposed. And, decisions may have to be made regarding the use of the previous transcript. Unless an institution has resolved such problems, a point of historical debate arises. That is, when transfers are admitted to an institution, the previous record need not be considered in determining the GPA for graduation and other uses at the receiving institution. But students readmitted at their home institution, and seeking to start over, continue to have an "albatross" of past work pulling down their attempts to develop a better record and earn a higher GPA unless some relief is granted.

All of the above falls, generally, into the area of what is called "academic forgiveness." Other names include: Second Chance, Forgiveness, Returning Adult Amnesty, Academic Relief, New Start, Reinstatement, Academic Bankruptcy, three year rule, and Academic Continuation.

For the most part, and for our use, academic forgiveness denotes a procedure, used by educational institutions, that allows students to be considered for readmission or graduation by means of recasting part or all of their former academic record. This recasting does not mean changing or expunging items from their record, but rather is seen as an opportunity for low grades or other evaluations to be removed, under certain conditions, from GPA calculations or other determinations. This statement is based on the view that the student record is considered to be a permanent and an accurate report of the student's record, but does not question the right of institutions to use and interpret that record as they see fit. The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) and academia agree that the student record should remain fixed.

Using or planning for a restart process raises many complex questions and concerns; the following are a sample.

- How many students be restarted while retaining some of the hours earned previously?
- How is the student record to be recast for readmitted students?
- May grades be factored out of GPA calculations?
- Can there be a trade off of time away from the institution and the number of D's and F's forgiven?
- What time periods are involved for students who start over?
- Should loss of credit be regarded as a penalty?
- What policies and procedures may be needed? And so on.

In the paragraphs below are some answers to the questions posed above, how and where these were obtained, an analysis of academic forgiveness or restarting, and some general recommendations and considerations.

Restarting at the State Colleges of New Jersey

New Jersey has nine state colleges: Thomas Edison, Glassboro, Jersey City, Kean, Montclair, Ramapo, Richard Stockton, Trenton, and William Patterson. Different procedures are used, but there exist many similarities and likenesses. Although the number of students involved in some form of academic relief at the State Colleges of New Jersey appears to be relatively small, there are some practices and procedures that emerge upon closer inspection.

Most unique of the State Colleges is Edison. Edison is an external degree college; that is, it does not have a campus or resident faculty. But it does have a highly refined and successful process for building individualized programs of study, within the degree areas that it offers, based on experience and previous studies. As such, Edison does not accept F or W designated courses; nor does it calculate a GPA. Therefore, no students are dismissed on academic grounds and questions of forgiveness do not normally arise. A student can leave anytime by non-payment of the annual tuition equivalency fee or restart anytime by paying fees. Students who submit fraudulent documents, however, are not allowed generally to continue. In other aspects, the college is similar to the other State Colleges.

At Glassboro, for the years preceding 1980, the Admissions Office estimated that between 7-15 students, who had been academically dismissed and who had waited the requisite year, were readmitted each year. Estimates for returning voluntary leave students was possibly 10 per year. No follow-up was made other than whether or not the student's name appeared on the "under 2.0" list at the end of the academic year.

For readmitted students, academic forgiveness or relief was available through the policy of repeating a course for a higher grade, and the discretion of the faculty and deans to recommend grade changes. When the student's

academic record was reviewed at the end of each academic year, and from then on, only those courses taken since returning to the institution were used in determining the required GPA needed for good academic standing (based on the total number of enrolled credits). For graduation purposes however, the student's entire academic record was used.

Presently, and partially as a result of the work done for this paper, a formalized and official restart process was established. Briefly, students may apply for restart if they have been absent from the College for at least three calendar years, had a GPA of less than 2.0 (C=2.0) when last attending, and are willing to write letters of application and intent.

The only other college that officially allows restarting is Stockton. Recently instituted policies at Stockton allow any student who left in good academic standing to return upon going through the regular admissions process. Students on a leave of absence can return simply by notifying the College's Office of Student Records of their intent. Such a leave is good for one academic year but can be renewed each year for a total of five years.

Similarly, Stockton students who are academically dismissed must stay out for one year. Upon readmission request they must present evidence that they can succeed. This can include letters of reference or credits earned at another institution during dismissal period. The prior academic record of readmitted students is not counted against them when their records are for dismissal. That is, their record as regards dismissal begins again from the date of readmission. Their total record, however, is counted for purposes of graduation and honors.

Of the other State Colleges, Jersey City and Montclair were the only ones that said they had informally discussed restarting. The other colleges said they understood the problem, but apparently only Glassboro and Stockton had made efforts to solve it in an institutional sense.

A New View of the Past

None of the colleges recast the permanent record of the readmitted student. That is, no grades are "factored out" of the transcript. Loss of credit, however, is handled in different ways. For example, Montclair will restart the record of a readmitted student who left in poor standing, but later earned a two year degree at another institution. Nothing is removed from the record, and the GPA is not carried forward. At Glassboro, the restart portion of the transcript shows previous credits, brought forward, in the same way as is done for transfer students.

The GPA of readmits also is handled in different ways. At Glassboro no previous grades are used in computing the new GPA. Kean and Stockton, however, provide some relief through change of grade. That is, at Kean an academic dean has power to authorize substituting withdrawals for F's for a semester, while at Stockton a grade of F can be changed to a passing grade with the approval of the instructor and chairperson. In the past, some D's at Jersey City had been changed to P's with the consent of the professor and the vice president for academic affairs. Similar instances occurred at Glassboro, but usually in advance of the student being dismissed. Stockton does not use GPA's (yet). A student must pass 2/3 of the classes attempted, with W's not counted.

All of the colleges except Stockton allow students to repeat courses. Glassboro, Trenton, Ramapo, and Montclair allow students to use the higher grade earned (assuming the repeated grade is higher) in their GPA; the other colleges use all grades earned in the computation of the GPA. Jersey City, Kean, and Montclair average-in the repeated grade in computing the GPA, but only count one course towards graduation credit. Ramapo, moreover, annotates repeated F grades on the transcript as RF, and these are not used in the GPA. Stockton allows courses to be repeated, as all a student must do

to meet graduation requirements is to achieve a 2/3 pass/attempted ratio. Kean is considering a proposal to keep F's and D's on the transcript, but only the highest grade for courses repeated will be used in the GPA.

All of the colleges require a 2.0 for graduation, but four exceptions to the 2.0 rule have existed in the past (at least only four schools admitted such). At Patterson, an academic dean may permit a student to graduate who has less than a 2.0 in the major area as long as the overall GPA is greater than or equal to 2.0. Kean College said they "hold the line pretty much." Montclair claimed that at most "two cases in seven years" may have graduated with less than a 2.0. Montclair added that their early warning system has made such cases rare occurrences. At Glassboro, the 2.0 takes effect immediately; the first semester GPA must be at least 2.0.

The situations and solutions described above appear to be exceptions and not the rule. The overall impression given by each of the registrars at the State Colleges was that they hold tight to the rules and only allow exceptions that are dictated to them by chairpersons or central administration.

In terms of relating practices at other colleges to those of New Jersey, the Idaho State University example provided in "Academic Forgiveness" comes closest in terms of conditions, but the time away evidently is not a fixed factor.

General Principles

As read above, the principle factors involved in a restart scheme are: (1) time absent from the institution; (2) the recasting of the student record following readmittance, and (3) conditions or constraints affecting the GPA and credits needed for graduation. For the schools noted above, the average is two years away from the institution, with one year being the most frequently mentioned. Recasting the student record usually deals with D and F grades, with some schools allowing a total restarting of courses and GPA; that is, a

"trade off" of all grades, for the opportunity to begin again.

Although the conditions involved are very mixed, they seem to exist to achieve a balance between a student's request, the integrity of the institution, and the merits of the particular situtation. There also seems to be no distinction between the public and private sectors in trying to do this. Both types of institutions appear to have used a direct proportion concept in relating the length of time away to what is to be recast on the student record. In the long term (3-5 years) cases, at least all of the F's are dropped from future GPA calculations; in the shorter cases, less is dropped. The amended record clearly shows what a student has achieved as the end result of his or her educational career, in addition to setbacks or mistakes along the way.

The above paragraphs and the results of the preceding sections suggest some general principles:

1. The student who is accepted for academic restart must have a likelihood for success. Those not accepted may have to come to grips with and learn to live with what may be limitations on their ability to learn at the collegiate level.
2. The best and easiest policy to administer will be one that is simple and contains no clauses that can be used by students and/or their advisors to manipulate the practice or procedures.
3. The strongest factor in the development of an academic restart practice is that of the analogy of the acceptance of transfer students.

Conclusions

The above discussion shows that many colleges are trying in as humane a way as possible to be fair to all involved while retaining a sense of academic integrity relative to academic forgiveness. That the State Colleges, through the use of repeated courses, changing grades to P or W,

or recalculating the GPA, practice academic forgiveness, albeit to a lesser extent than that in some of the examples given in "Academic Forgiveness", also is evident. In fact, the examples quoted in "Academic Forgiveness" and those provided by the State Colleges of New Jersey strongly suggest that many institutions have implemented restart policies that have not been formalized or institutionalized. Moreover, for those colleges practicing restart, the policies are extremely varied.

As far as the pro for restarting is concerned, restart students are given an opportunity to present their academic record in such a way as to reflect their academic abilities, and not their personal or remedial problems. To the contrary is the argument that since the student earned the grades, they are part of the record and no one has a right to remove them or ignore them. (Reiterating, by remove is not meant expunge. Rather, remove means, in these instances, that the courses and grades are viewed relative to the student's continuing educational record and graduation requirements.

Should an institution adopt a restart policy, the student's welfare must be primary in any considerations or process. An institution could lose more in institutional respect, accountability and quality, than it would gain in students aided if the restart practice is not established carefully and thoroughly. Participating students have to be clearly instructed as to the implications for upper level degree programs, as well as professional and graduate schools. The policies and practices have to be published and explained as plainly as possible. In terms of avoiding litigation, it makes sense that if an institution practices restart, the information, policy and procedures must be made known in some official publication of the college.

For the student who participates in a restart procedure in which credits

and grades are "traded off", mixed results may be achieved. True, the student may achieve a better record and GPA, and even graduate. But the transcript forever tells the complete story, be it to a graduate school, an employer, or anyone else.

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References

The resources used include the following: Glassboro State policies and procedures, AACRAO's "Academic Record and Transcript Guide," and Quann and Associate's ADMISSIONS, ACADEMIC RECORDS AND REGISTRAR SERVICE (Jossey-Bass, 1979). A literature search was done but with meager results. The only recent important article is "Academic Forgiveness" (a panel discussion), COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY, Vol. 53, No. 4, pp. 732-738. It provides a list of 20 schools that practice some form of academic forgiveness, and a discussion of the pros and cons of academic forgiveness.